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SUBJECT: RETURNNEES ARRIVING IN HUGE NUMBERS TO WESTERN
BAHR EL GHAZAL, NORTHERN BAHR EL GHAZAL, AND UNITY STATES

REF: a) Khartoum 0620, b) Khartoum 0637

Summary and Comment

¶1. The USAID/Khartoum Senior Humanitarian Advisor and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Specialist visited Unity State from February 19 to 23 to review the IDP returns situation and examine sources of fragility. As reported reflets, the USAID Khartoum IDP Specialist also traveled with a USAID Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/DCHA) team to Western and Northern Bahr el Ghazal States for the same purpose from February 23 to 28.

¶2. All states visited have established and maintained a Sustainable Returns Taskforce, which includes stakeholders involved with IDP and returns issues. However, the monitoring and tracking systems were not functional due the failure of the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SRRC) to release the funds for field implementation of the project.

¶3. Spontaneous returns continue, especially to Unity and Northern Bahr el Ghazal States, despite the critical lack of basic services and poor roads. Many returnees have chosen to stay somewhere close to home if home is not ready, creating new large villages or swelling towns that could be sanitation and public health hazards during the rainy season. End summary and comment.

Background

¶4. From February 19 to 23, a USAID/DCHA mission from Khartoum visited Unity State to investigate reports of an influx of returnees to the area and to examine sources of fragility in the state. The visit was part of a series of USAID/DCHA assessments to determine how USAID/DCHA programs might provide a stabilizing environment in support of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). A USAID/DCHA team from the southern sector also visited Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Western Bahr el Ghazal States from February 23 to 28. This cable complements the fragility analyses, focusing specifically on IDP

movements and intentions.

IDP>Returns Tracking and Monitoring Issues

¶15. Unity State has long been the battlefield for militias, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The state's vast oil reserves have been a major contributing factor to continuous war and instability. Following the signing of the CPA, significant changes have begun with the disarmament and merging of militia groups, arrival of returnees, and increased freedom of movement.

¶16. In the Unity State, the influx of returnees is quite visible. According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 40,000 returnees arrived between May 2005 and January 2006. Roads from Khartoum through Southern Kordofan are passable during the dry season, especially to the northern parts of the state. Abyomnom (Mayom County) and Pariang (Pariang County) are the two primary receiving points for returnees. Most of the returnees intend to continue to other parts of the state, but the poor road conditions and the presence of landmines complicate the journey. Heavy forest now covers some roads that have hardly seen traffic during the past 20 years.

¶17. The SRRC, OCHA, and the international non-governmental organization (NGO) CARE have established and operated a monitoring and tracking system for registering returnees in the state. In addition, a Sustainable Returns Team has also been functional with assistance

KHARTOUM 00000751 002 OF 003

from OCHA. However, the tracking system no longer functions because the enumerators and field protection monitors have not received payment for eight months and have stopped working. OCHA has been responsible for paying the enumerators. U.N. World Food Program (WFP) distribution figures indicate that the IDP population for Bentiu and Rubkona is approximately 95,000.

¶18. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) plans to establish a way station in the vicinity of Bentiu town, although most humanitarian agencies on the ground preferred the way station to be placed farther north in Kharasana. State officials sought to avoid this site, claiming it to be a contested area (along with the Heglig oilfield) that lies within Southern Kordofan borders, according to current U.N. maps.

¶19. In Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal, and Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, each state's Sustainable Returns Team is meeting regularly and sharing information; however, the monitoring and tracking systems are not functioning also due to the lack of funding.

IDP>Returns Situation in Wau and Aweil

¶110. Five IDP camps surround Wau. Although the SRRC estimates the number of IDPs living in and around Wau to be 52,000 people, U.N. agencies use a figure of 31,000. The IDPs are mostly Dinka from neighboring Warap and Lakes States, and some are from the Raja area. IDPs in the camps mainly depend on selling charcoal and firewood, cutting grass, and doing casual work in the market to earn a living. USAID partners CARE and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) helped establish community centers and trained IDP women on income-generating activities.

¶111. IDPs have indicated a willingness to remain in Wau and Aweil unless services improve in areas to which the

IDPs hope to return. A group of more than 600 returnees predominantly from the Dinka tribe traveled from Western Equatoria and arrived in Wau during late January. The group initially planned to reach Warap State, but has decided to stay in Wau in an area called Majak. NGOs and U.N. agencies provided food and other services to the group, who claimed the poor services and inter-tribal clashes in Warap have forced them to stay longer in Wau. (Comment: Some interlocutors suspected that the Dinka want to build a presence in Wau town to counterbalance the Fertits and other tribes. End comment.)

¶12. In a visit to Eastern Bank Camp, the main IDP camp in Wau, the USAID IDP Specialist interviewed some IDP families who said they would stay in Wau even if the humanitarian community offered a return package and transportation. IDPs expressed concern over the floods and droughts that have affected Lakes and Warap States in recent years and caused poor harvests. One of IDPs stated, "People are still coming from Warap. Why do you want us to go there?" During a recent visit, the SRRC commissioner tasked the SRRC Wau director with leading the process to devise a state plan for IDP return and reintegration. The SRRC office in Wau will soon have three branch offices in the three Western Bahr el Ghazal State counties.

¶13. In Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, conditions are similar. Since the onset of the dry season in October, returnees from Darfur and Khartoum have arrived in Aweil. Based on a February assessment, SRRC estimates that there are 6,200 vulnerable persons in Aweil, including 2,100 returnees.

¶14. Aweil has two small IDP camps with an estimated total population of 4,500. The main camp, Koum, is located seven kilometers outside Aweil town and includes a permanent USAID-funded IRC health center, a water point, and a huge base for brickmaking, an income-generating activity for IDPs. During discussions with USAID representatives, IDPs indicated a preference to

KHARTOUM 00000751 003 OF 003

remain in the area, which has good farmland. No figures are available on the number of returnees, despite the influx from the North and South Darfur. Returnees coming from South Darfur use Al Deain-Gok-Machar route, and those coming from Khartoum use Moglad-Warawar route.

¶15. Although humanitarian capacity is weak, it should improve, as more agencies are planning to move to town. Local authorities have endorsed IOM plans to establish a way station at Warawar to assist returnees. IRC, WFP, OCHA, and the U.N. Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) are present in Aweil town. Other humanitarian agencies are present in areas previously held by the SPLM.

Recommendations

¶16. Enumerators and field monitors need to be paid regularly to ensure the tracking and monitoring system does not fall apart. The system is only useful if it is consistent. This information needs to be fed regularly into the Sustainable Returns teams and used as a planning tool for provision of services in areas of return.

¶17. Provision of basic services in places of arrival for returnees should be treated as top priority. The availability of services proved to be a key factor affecting the decision of returnees to go home or not. Even those who decided to go home are waiting at another gathering point that is not their final destination, until services are available.

¶18. As reported reftels, a community-based approach must be adopted in order to focus on the most vulnerable populations regardless of their status (displaced, returnee, or resident) to avoid generating unintended inequities and conflict.

WHITAKER